

Nikolai Sladkov

WIDEY-NOLES IN THE FOREST

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The forest is dense and green and full of rustlings, squeaks and chirruping.

Suddenly a hunter comes into the forest, and everyone hides, pricks up his ears, and is on guard. Alarm spreads from tree to tree and from branch to branch like the ripples from a stone thrown into water. Everyone hides behind a bush or a twig, and not a squeak can be heard.

If you want to see, you must become invisible; if you want to hear, you must stand stock-still with bated breath.

I know this: that quick eyes are watching me and that tiny wet noses are catching the puffs of wind coming from my



direction. There are many little animals and birds around, but just try to find them!

I have come here to see a scops owl—a tiny bird, not bigger than a starling.

It keeps on crying “I’m sle-ee-eping! Sle-ee-eping! Sle-ee-eping! Sle-ee-eping!” the whole night long like a forest clock ticking: “Tick-tock! Tick-tock!...”

At dawn this forest clock will stop. The scops owl will fall silent and hide. It will hide very cleverly as though it had never been in the forest.

Who hasn’t heard a scops owl’s cry—that “tick-tock” of the night clock? But what does a scops owl look like? I had only seen a drawing of it. And I wanted to see it in real life so much that I spent a whole day in the forest, looking at every tree, at every branch and into every bush. I grew tired and hungry, but I couldn’t find it.

I sat down on an old tree stump and stayed there for a while, not making a sound.

Suddenly—wherever did it come from?—I saw a tiny snake! A grey snake with a flat little head on a thin neck, like a bud on a fine stem. It had crawled out from somewhere and was looking straight in my eyes, as though expecting something from me.

Snakes are slyboots; they have to know everything.

I said to it, like in a fairy tale:





“Little snake, tell me where the scops owl—the forest clock—is hidden.”

The snake teased me, flicking its tongue in and out, and then streaked into the grass.

...Suddenly all the hidey-holes of the forest opened before me.

Like a long ribbon the snake rustled through the grass, reappeared at another tree stump, and dived under its mossy roots. No sooner had it dived there than a large green lizard



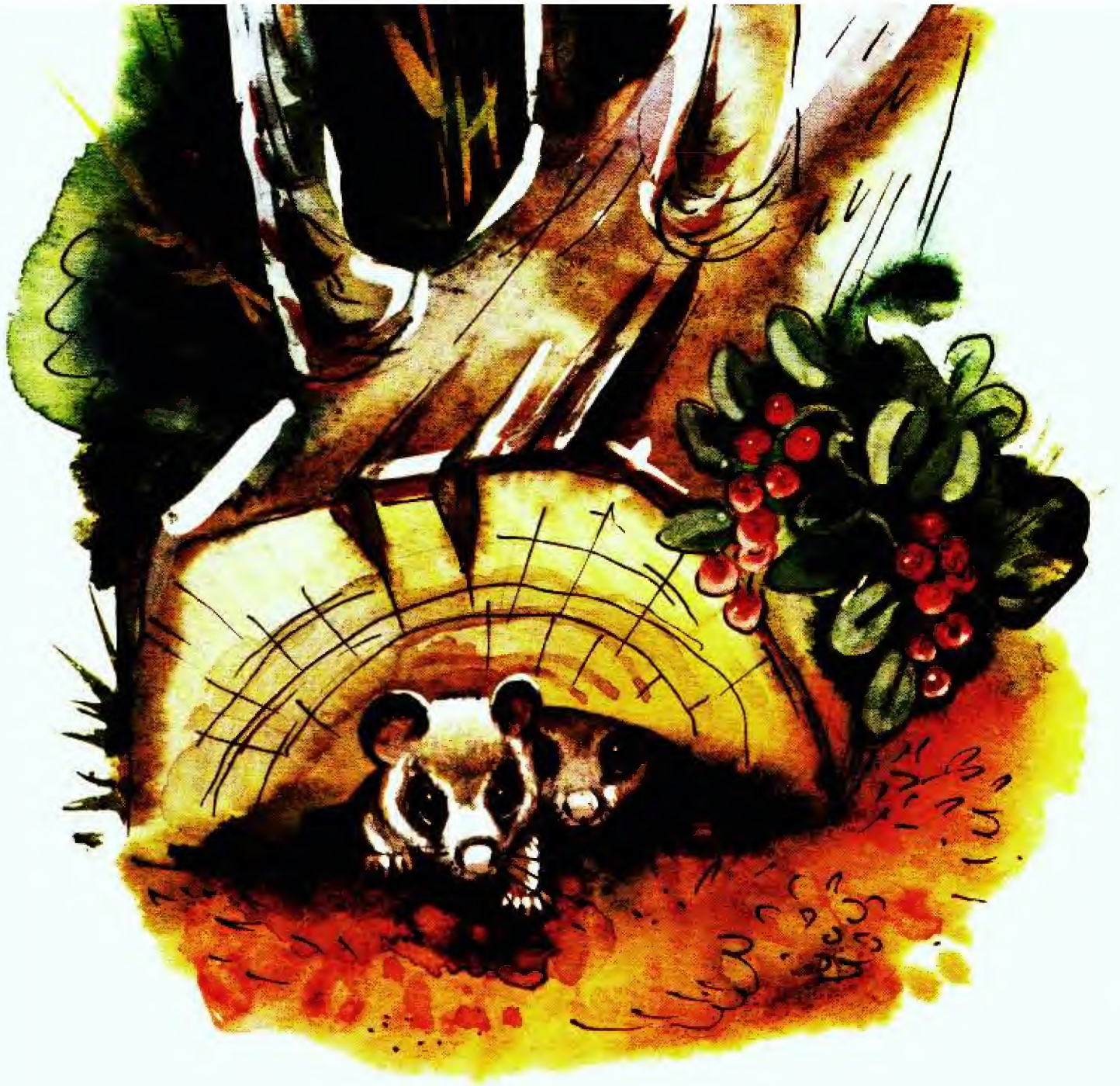


with a blue head dashed out from under the roots, as though someone had given it a big push. It rustled across a dry leaf and popped into a little burrow.

That burrow was the hidey-hole of a blunt-nosed field vole.

The vole got scared of the blue-headed lizard, dashed out of the burrow—from darkness into broad daylight—rushed about all over the place, then dived under a log.





There came squeaks and the sounds of a scuffle from under the log. It turned out to be another hidey-hole. Two little animals—dormice—had been snoozing away there the whole day.

They rushed out from under the log—mad with fear, their tails upright—and ran up the tree.

They chattered—“tr-r-r-r”—for a moment, got scared again, and ran still higher up.





There was a hole in the tree there.

The dormice wanted to dive into it, but collided head-on at the entrance. They squeaked with pain, dashed in again—and fell into the hole together.

Just then there jumped from the hole—“zh-zh-zh”—a little forest imp! With small ears on the top of the head like tiny horns, and round yellow eyes. It perched on a branch, with its back on me, and turned its head round, staring at me steadily.



Of course, it was not a forest imp at all, but a scops owl—the night clock!

Then it dived into the leaves before I could say knife.

There came squeaks and the sounds of a tussle from in there: that was somebody else's hidey-hole.

This is how the tiny forest creatures dashed from tree hole to tree hole, from burrow to burrow, from log to log, and from bush to bush, showing me their little secret burrows and hidey-holes.

Alarm spreads all over the forest from tree to tree, from bush to bush, like waves from a stone thrown in the water. And everybody hides, jumping behind a bush or onto a branch—and keeps silent.

If you want to see, you must become invisible. If you want to hear, you must become silent. If you want to learn, you must wait with bated breath.





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HIDEY-HOLES IN THE FOREST

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